

“A Shell and What Became of It”:

Missile Narratives and Commemorative Trajectories at Gettysburg

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[On] Friday, my mother said she would take the feather bed to the garret where the others were neatly packed away. She went up to get the place ready for it and came down to get some one to help carry it up; while she was down there was a loud crash and a shell came tearing through a fifteen inch brick wall, striking a beam that supported the roof, split it in two, broke out a rung from the crib in which we had slept when children, and having spent its force rolled down the stairs to the first landing.

Elizabeth McClean, *Gettysburg Compiler* (8 July 1908)

Gettysburg’s missiles have notoriously long trajectories. In July 1908, Elizabeth McClean helped the *Gettysburg Compiler* mark the battle’s forty-fifth anniversary with her remembrance of a shell that had traveled from the fray into her family’s home.¹ The intrusion took place in the midst of the intense push that marked the battle’s final day. Until that moment the McCleans, tucked away on central Baltimore Street, had seen little of the action, although stray bullets flattened themselves against their wall. The shell was another matter altogether, for its impact lasted far beyond its moment of collision. Elizabeth didn’t just preserve the story of that day: her family, who had initially been too afraid to handle the shell, decided to keep it. They preserved the damage it had done, too. Writing for the same newspaper a year later, her brother Robert recalled how “a broken piece of timber struck out by the shell on its course through the garret was driven through the side of a crib standing there, leaving an opening unrepaired to this day, as a memorial of the battle.”² The impulse to memorialize seized others. The next owner of the McClean house had “another shell put in the wall where the first one came though.”³ Another family embedded a three-inch Reed shell in their shot-riddled wall alongside a cluster of bullet holes. At least nine buildings in Gettysburg remain studded with traces (authentic or makeshift) of the battle’s impact — traces that visitors still seek out, intent on an engagement with the past that monuments up at the Soldiers’ National Cemetery don’t seem to yield.⁴

¹ “The Rebels Are Coming!”, *Gettysburg Compiler* (8 July 1908), 2-3.

² ‘A Boy in Gettysburg — 1863’, *Gettysburg Compiler* (30 June 1909), 2-3, (p. 2).

³ Elizabeth McClean, 2.

⁴ I am indebted to Timothy H. Smith for information about each of these cases. See “A Tour of Gettysburg’s

Indeed, these vernacular memorials explode the workings of public monuments altogether, and I want to take that explosion as a starting point for a reevaluation of the commemorative practice that emerged at Gettysburg. It seems inevitable now that the Soldiers' National Cemetery, Abraham Lincoln's brief remarks at its dedication, and the unveiling, in 1869, of the Soldiers' National Monument should have become mythical points of origin for the war's commemorative inheritance. In 1863, the battle represented an important geographical turning point in the war's progress; coinciding with the Federal triumph at Vicksburg a day later, on July 4, Gettysburg appeared to reaffirm the consonance between the Republican cause and the foundational aims of the Declaration of Independence. And while the battle's appalling casualty rate alarmed those who flocked to Cemetery Ridge, Little Round Top, and Devil's Den, the battle hastened on a commemorative endeavour that, in its urgent need to honour the fallen, would set the standard for commemorative acts to come. With time, Lincoln's words became a blueprint for the nation that would arise from the rubble; we know that story. But its inexorable narrative trajectory, bolstered by symbolism and shored-up by hindsight, obscures this project's messy beginnings.

Commemoration, I want to suggest, started with souvenir gatherers like the McCleans who, with thousands of civilians and soldiers, collected objects that helped them to tell this event. Historical accounts of the battle's aftermath and Gettysburg's commemorative endeavour have generally cast this popular activity as a fundamentally separate, "unofficial" act of remembering.⁵ At the very least, souvenir gathering provides background noise to the official commemorative efforts of state officials and federal agents. At most, it is parsed as an intuitive and frustratingly silent impulse – "the deep human need," as Brooke Hindle puts it, "to reach beyond abstraction to reality."⁶ Of course, we can never reach far enough. A scrap of violence remembered; a fragment of cultural cachet; a sacred relic of Union sacrifice: the souvenir's dumb materiality may promise immediacy, but it always accrues meaning through narrative, in the desire to tell that prompts both taking and keeping.

It is precisely this rhetorical power that historical accounts tend to overlook as they feel for the "reality" behind the Gettysburg myth. In fact, the various things individuals collected

Visual Battle Damage", *Adams County History*, 2 (1996), 41-71.

⁵ See Gregory Coco, *A Strange and Blighted Land: Gettysburg: The Aftermath of a Battle* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1995); Michael De Gruccio, "Letting the War Slip Through Our Hands: Material Culture and the Weakness of Words in the Civil War Era" *Weirding the War: Stories from the War's Ragged Edges*, ed. by Stephen Berry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Jim Weeks, *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and American Shrine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁶ "How much is a Piece of the True Cross Worth?", *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. by Ian M.G. Quimby (New York: Norton, 1978), 1.

from the field gave rise to different forms of rhetoric, both novel and familiar. In recuperating some of the comforting and strange narrative turns those objects engendered, I want to suggest that the vernacular rhetoric of memory that accumulated around them had its own impact on the monuments, built and spoken, that sought to commemorate Gettysburg from November 1863 on. Finding “memorials” rather than private “mementos” in the spent projectiles that had terrorized them, the McCleans and their neighbors remembered a charged moment of fear — and saw fit to share it. At stake in attending to their stories isn’t only a claim about the form Gettysburg’s memorials would take, but a claim about the commemorative collectives that would gather around them. For these civilians, as for Abraham Lincoln, the mass-produced remains of violence gave rise to kinds of remembering which reimagined the relationship between individual and nation.

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Grasping this impact requires closer inspection of the narrative habits individuals brought to their souvenirs, especially those that resembled sentimental relics. As Teresa Barnett has argued, the production and exchange of relics was central to the sentimental tradition’s influence upon white, predominantly middle-class identity formation in the early Republic. From keepsakes and mourning tokens to shards of Plymouth Rock, personal possessions circulated amongst friends and family traced the local domestic networks that supported the liberal individual, while historical mementos recognized the intimacies one might share with famous members of this democratic family. For this reason, as Barnett asserts, recognisably sentimental relics — like foliage, blood-stained fragments of uniform, and personal possessions — became an important emotional resource during the war, as conflict separated families and divided the ‘national household’.⁷

The nurse Emily Souder was one collector who took refuge in the sentimental relic’s narrative stability. Souder had traveled to Gettysburg in July 1863 to tend the wounded, and her diligent gatherings augmented her remedial task. Writing to her friend Mary of the desperate need for aid workers, she pressed her point home by enclosing a piece of the battlefield with her letter:

many [soldiers] that were alive yesterday are gone to-day and several that we saw to-day, I fear we shall see no more forever. I inclose a few flower seeds and a blossom, which I gathered to-day for you. Tell Mr. P. to come here and try to save some of these poor souls.⁸

⁷ *Sacred Relics: Pieces of the Past in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁸ “Emily Souder to Mary C—, Gettysburg 16 July 1863”, *Leaves from the Battle-Field of Gettysburg* (Philadelphia,

Slipped in between descriptions of the disappearing dead and a request for help, Souder's mementos comprised an eloquent gesture, legible to any member of sentimentalism's school of feeling. An aspiration to narrative continuity is bound-up in her battlefield extracts. Invoking mourning tradition, these relics were lasting remembrances of men fast becoming anonymous in death, creating an intimate spatiotemporal relationship with the soldier's suffering. Through that relation Souder tended to the individual's memory, shielding soldiers from the oblivion of "no more forever," circulating them within her community of friends, and honouring them in ways family burials no longer could.

Yet if sentimental relics removed death's sting, missile narratives held moments of threat firmly in view. Far from inviting imaginative communion with particular individuals, these lawless objects assault the substance of sentimental individualism. Missile narratives register the shock of the invasion of what one witness called "the sanctuary of home": the tissue of material comforts and emotional associations that homes are made of.⁹ Here, households are rearranged around the missile's incision, which carves a path through spaces devoted to mundane routines and family memories. Dwelling on her mother's presence in the garret just before the shell's impact, Elizabeth McClean lingered over death's nearness as much as survival's miracle. Breaking "a rung from the crib in which we had slept when children," the missile's trajectory intersects with family history: Elizabeth's narrative registers a threat to the very stuff of personal existence. The remembering done around missiles is acutely spatial, and done with the body: Tillie Pierce Alleman, who lived opposite the Gettysburg Methodist Parsonage, saw a missile crash through the wall beside a window, where a young girl was watching the battle; and she remembered how the girl's brother, in the next room, "saw it enter and go out of the building."¹⁰ Witness upon witness made the incidental momentous. Sanctifying stairways and garrets, each published narrative, like each shell mortared into a part-public display, offers up an occupied memory of invasion for collective consideration.

What sort of collectives might emerge in the missile's shadow? Souder's sentimental relics guaranteed the narrative extension of personal bonds, which had knit the imagined Union 'family' together. Missile narratives, though, reveal an unsettling tension between the individual's narrative agency and moments in which that agency is given up to influences beyond the individual's control. With Souder's gatherings in mind, we might expect speakers to seek narrative stability, using the missile's volatile force to charge established rhetorics of

PA: C. Sherman, 1864), 27.

⁹ William McClean, "The Days of Terror in 1863", *Gettysburg Compiler* (1 July, 1908), 4.

¹⁰ *At Gettysburg: What a Girl Saw and Heard of the Battle* (New York: W. Lake Borland, 1889), 98.

collective purpose. Where the pervasive wartime rhetoric of a divinely-sanctioned Union might move us to look for thanks to God, a nod to fortune's intervention, or patriotic exclamation, a degree of reticence prevails. The most striking thing about these stories are the things that witnesses do not say about them, even as later decades invited embellishment.

Emily Souder herself struggled to interpret the bureau she was shown in one Gettysburg family's home, "one side of which was burst through, and a drawer knocked out by a ball which entered the house, passing through a middle partition, and out at the opposite side." Yet the sight took her out of herself, repositioning her and bringing sudden clarity: "One realizes the battle," she wrote, "when hearing these things from an eye-witness, on the spot where they occurred."¹¹ For Gettysburg civilian Sarah Broadhead, who cowered in her cellar when bombardments encroached on the town, "the scream of each shell" prompted the reflection that "human beings were [being] hurried through excruciating pain, into another world." The unlooked-for proximity to battlefield death that Sarah found in the missile's aural trajectory shook her faith and, with it, her own place in the world: "[t]he thought made me very sad, and [I] felt that if it was God's will, I would rather be taken away than to see the misery that would follow."¹²

For Sarah, as for those civilians who embedded their own missile narratives in later, lengthier eyewitness accounts, these objects let one look at oneself in relation to the battle. They opened out crevices of personal terror and despair, and mapped their place within the battlefield's larger topography; they revealed new kinds of kinship born of violence, and haunting affinities with the battlefield dead. It might sound like a simple thing. But this moment of "realizing" battle was profound, and something Henry James struggled to explain when, in 1914, he recalled hearing Gettysburg's "boom of far-away guns" from the family garden in Newport. "This *was*, as it were, the War — the War palpably in Pennsylvania," James averred, and it comprised a kind of "'contact' with [...] the concrete experience" that was the soldier's lot. In James's memory, Gettysburg's bombardments had altered his kinship with his own family, who "actually *listened* together, in their almost ignobly safe stillness" to the far-off fray.¹³ They epitomized the peculiar hybridity he discerned in the wartime experiences of individuals across the States, as they struggled to navigate the unexpected relationships the war produced between an inner, private life and "the prolonged outwardness naturally at the very highest

¹¹ Souder, 'At Gettysburg Cemetery', *Leaves*, 141.

¹² *The Diary of a Lady, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: From June 15 to July 15, 1863* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library), n.p.

¹³ *Notes of a Son and Brother* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 290.

pitch, that was the general sign of the situation.”¹⁴ Confronting the sudden exposure to which the war’s violence subjected them, and finding their way onto a broad national field, James observed, soldiers and civilians witnessed the transformation of their own identities.

With hindsight on his side James fixed Gettysburg’s fragment of “contact” at the heart of his autobiography, as one of his formative moments. He wasn’t the first to discover the rhetorical uses to which missile narratives could be put. Having traveled to Gettysburg back in November 1863 for the dedication of a national cemetery, one correspondent for the *Washington Morning Chronicle* found himself writing a memorial into existence as he peered at another set of bullet marks in the home of the famous Gettysburg citizen-turned-volunteer soldier, John Burns. “[W]hile lying on his bed,” he wrote,

a rebel Minie [sic] ball cut a clean hole through his window, took off the back of a chair, and passed through the opposite wall, above his head and not a foot from it; and your correspondent now is writing beside these marks of battle, which will be visited by thousands hereafter, who, while inspecting them, will with reverence and respect remember the name and patriotism of brave old John Burns.¹⁵

Acquiring the prestige of a commemorative inscription, this battle damage honours heroism begotten of a sudden shift in the relations between private and public life. And just as flattened newspaper print gains depth beside these “marks of battle,” this reporter’s vision of “thousands hereafter” anticipates a collective capable of interpreting those “marks” meaningfully. He had seen that collective materialising on Gettysburg’s crowded streets, where locals stood at stalls arrayed with the missiles that found them during the battle. The “little tables set out with relics, for sale, of the terrible struggle, in the form of bullets and every kind of projectile” invited passers-by to purchase a crevice of experience, opened and inhabited by violence and fear, during one of the most important battles for the Union cause. In an apt turn of phrase the correspondent found himself “forcibly impressed” by the “painful sense of the terrible ordeal to which the citizens had been subjected.”¹⁶

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These fragments of sound, material, and memory may seem far removed from the statement of symbolic order that was announced up at Cemetery Hill the next morning, on 19 November 1863. Lincoln’s statement was eloquent and persuasive; scholars have generally allowed it to

¹⁴ James, *Notes*, 227.

¹⁵ ‘The Gettysburg Dedication: An Interesting Letter from One of Our Special Correspondents’, *Washington Morning Chronicle*, (21 November 1863), 1-2 (p. 1).

¹⁶ Ibid.

speak for Gettysburg's influence on the war's commemorative legacy. It is easy to see why: the Soldiers' National Cemetery clearly represented a revolutionary reinterpretation of democratic principle. The design devised by David Wills and William Saunders was, as scholars have noted, a symbolic statement of intent, which departed purposefully from the rural cemetery pattern. Rigidly-ranked graves were grouped by State in large arched rows, which equalized the fallen around a central point, and invited mourners not to grieve for individuals, but to experience what Wills called the sublime "grandeur" of a democratic collective built on military sacrifice.¹⁷

It is now taken as given that Lincoln's address complemented Saunders's vision. As Mark Schantz observes, "[t]he cemetery at Gettysburg, and the dedicatory remarks that Abraham Lincoln made there, helped Americans imagine themselves in a different way: as members of a nation-state in which death, dedication, and devotion conferred enduring citizenship."¹⁸ There is a problematic smoothness to this well-worn interpretation. If we learn anything from missile "memorials," it should be that commemorative work begun in an event's shadow is a tricky business. As Edward S. Casey argues, "we do not memorialize *in* the present what is happening *at* present." A "time-lapse of some significant sort" is necessary to the practical work of making monuments; time allows communities to develop the symbolic language of an event's shared interpretation.¹⁹ It is worth remembering that Lincoln's speech was finalized and delivered upon a landscape of *unfinished* symbolism. This initial act of commemoration may have been planned to a fault, conceived with the intention of purifying northern soil, and gathering the Union dead into an order representative of the democratic nation state it was hoped the war would engender. Yet it competed with the presence of scattered bodies that had not – materially or mnemonically – come to rest.

Plans to collect hastily-buried Union remains from among 7,000 bodies ranged across the 25 square-mile battlefield had gone awry as Autumn approached. Wills and Saunders had intended to have the dead buried before dedication day arrived and winter hardened the ground, but their agents struggled to complete their formidable task. On the day of the ceremony, the outlines of mass Confederate graves would have been evident to any souvenir gatherer ranging the field outside the cemetery; inside, burial parties had struggled to meet their quotas, and marshals warded visitors away from unfinished plots.²⁰ Acknowledging the

¹⁷ "Remarks on the Design for the Soldiers' National Cemetery, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania", *Report of the Select Committee Relative to the Soldiers' National Cemetery*, (Harrisburg, PA: Singerly and Myers, 1864), 38.

¹⁸ "Death and the Gettysburg Address" in *The Gettysburg Address: Perspectives on Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, ed. by Sean Conant (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 122.

¹⁹ *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 230.

²⁰ Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 19-40.

conspicuous presence of the dead at this commemorative event — the meeting of inert matter with transcendent symbolism — is vital to understanding the rhetorical difficulties the dead caused the living, and the role battlefield souvenirs played in addressing those difficulties. If the National Cemetery’s consecration was intended to transform what Ian Finseth calls the “extravagant corporeality” of the dead into “monuments to democratic continuity,” ceremonial dignity and political ideology contended with the stark realities of battlefield death.²¹ Scholars agree that the scale of war deaths, and the anonymity conferred on so many men, altered the dimensions of the Union’s democratic community, which had honored famous men in public and mourned family in domestic privacy. The federal government’s reburial program, writes Drew Faust, created “a constituency of the slain and their mourners who would change the very definition of the nation and its obligations.”²² In 1863 — indeed, for decades to come — it was not easy to envisage what such a constituency would look like. Where should mourners place themselves in this landscape? How would a relationship with the militarized dead feel? And was this burial enough?

Gettysburg’s gaping graves certainly didn’t make answering those questions a straightforward task, as Lincoln himself discovered. In fact, his address neither answer them, nor firmly establishes the momentous transformation scholars have found within it. True, his remarks attempted to incorporate the dead into the “nation” they invoked. Garry Wills and Drew Faust best represent the broader consensus that the address was an “explanation and justification of the war’s carnage” which sanctified the dead as “agents of political meaning and devotion.”²³ Yet, invested in the political agency Lincoln’s words appear to awaken, these arguments insist on the absolute symbolism of his sanitizing rhetoric. Wills’s suggestion, though, that Lincoln eschews “all local emphasis,” lifting “the battle to a level of abstraction that purges it of grosser matter” to “[align] the dead in ranks of an ideal order” passes over the presence of the bloody ground altogether.²⁴

Lincoln’s speech, though, had the battlefield at its core, and was attentive to an embodied remembrance similar to that manifested in civilians’ missile narratives. This shouldn’t be surprising if we consider Lincoln’s schedule. As Martin Johnson recounts in his meticulous reconstruction of Lincoln’s journey to Gettysburg, the President not only toured the battlefield the morning before the ceremony, and visited the place where his friend John F.

²¹ “The Civil War Dead: Realism and the Problem of Anonymity”, *American Literary History*, 25 (Fall 2013), 1-28, (2; 25).

²² *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 237.

²³ Faust, 189.

²⁴ Wills, 37.

Reynolds had died; he had also been conveyed through the town's bustling streets the night before, addressed serenaders, and spoken with civilians.²⁵ He may well have noticed the souvenir stands that struck the *Chronicle's* reporter. Thanks to Johnson, we know for sure that, in searching out William Seward to discuss his speech, Lincoln met Seward's hosts, the Harpers, whose home had borne the brunt of stray missiles aplenty.²⁶ Major Benjamin Brown French, who was also lodging there that night, recalled the story the President may have heard as he was welcomed into their busy parlour. Mrs Harper had remained indoors throughout the battle, French noted, and was present when "two bullets came into the house through the windows." A shell also landed in the garden "within a few feet of the house, but did not explode. It was picked up, the charge extracted, & now lies on the parlor table, where I saw it."²⁷

Did Lincoln see it too? Did he hear that story? In a sense, it doesn't matter: the ways of speaking these objects prompted were in the air at Gettysburg. And we find evidence of them in Lincoln's words. Martin Johnson has most convincingly connected last-minute changes Lincoln made to his address with his visit to the spot where Reynolds died, just hours before the dedication. Johnson argues that a reckoning with his friend's death prompted Lincoln's "new understanding" of his dedicatory task: he emphasised this understanding by replacing commemoration's respectful stasis — "to stand here" — with an active, emotional state — that of *dedication* — which he implicitly aligned with the soldier's deeds:

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here; while it can never forget what they did here.

It is rather for us, the living, ~~to stand here~~, we here be dedica / ted to the great task remaining before us —²⁸

Bridging the page-break between the first half of the address, written on the Executive Mansion's headed notepaper, and its second, which Johnson argues was drafted in Gettysburg, Lincoln's amendments foreground the "powerful forward momentum" that characterizes the latter half, and Lincoln's vision of the "great task remaining before us."²⁹ For Johnson, this momentum constitutes a crucial turn in Lincoln's politics. Written alongside his Annual Message for 1863, which promised a "more comprehensive and long-range plan for

²⁵ Martin P. Johnson, *Writing the Gettysburg Address* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

²⁶ Johnson, 134-137.

²⁷ Benjamin Brown French, *Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee's Journal, 1828-1870*, ed. Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1989), 433-434.

²⁸ I replicate the wording, annotations, and page breaks in the "Nicolay" copy, from which Lincoln delivered his speech on the battlefield. See "Gettysburg Address (19 November 1863)", Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gettysburg-address/ext/trans-nicolay-copy.html> [accessed 10/20/2018].

²⁹ Johnson, 162.

Reconstruction,” the address reveals Lincoln’s move from a political philosophy firmly rooted in the Founders’ premises of liberty and equality, to that of a reconstructed Union responsive to Emancipation’s demands.³⁰ Emphasizing the deeds of the dead, he readies his audience for change.

There is another strain to Lincoln’s rhetoric, though, and it has implications for a wider commemorative practice as well as Lincoln’s statecraft. The deictic intonation of the address has generally gone unremarked by scholars — which is surprising considering Lincoln’s reluctance to tie his words to material sites or physical moments.³¹ Yet, as the address swept from past to future, turning away from the abstractions of Founding documents, and recognizing the inadequacies of funereal ceremony, it lighted on an experience of destruction that memorial symbolism could not grasp. “But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow, this ground.” With that “larger sense,” Lincoln’s speech proceeded beyond the confines of Saunders’s cemetery, opening a crevice in his rhetoric where battle got in:

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say *here*; while it can never forget what they did *here*. It is rather for us, the living, ~~to stand here~~, we *here* be dedica / ted to the great task remaining before us — that, from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they *here*, gave the last full measure of devotion — that we *here* highly resolve these dead shall not have died in vain...³²

Lincoln’s is a chant deictic which records the altered terms of Union and the individual’s relationship to it — but not in terms of glorious, symbolically finished transcendence. We might better understand it by turning to Lincoln’s one other significant public use of the deictic. Two and a half years earlier, as the president-elect travelled to Washington to take up his post and its heavy burden, he had found clarity at Philadelphia’s Independence Hall. Professing himself “filled with deep emotion at finding myself standing here, in this place, where were collected together the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle, from which sprang the institutions under which we live,” Lincoln grounded the viability of his political philosophy in his felt connection with this hallowed place. Summoned to restore peace to the country, he drew his capability from his sympathy with the building, noting “that all the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn [...] from the sentiments which originated and were given to the

³⁰ Johnson, 166.

³¹ One alternative reading is suggested by Dana Luciano; see *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2007), 215-260.

³² My italics.

world from this hall.”³³ Lincoln’s sentimental logic, like Emily Souder’s, was inexorable: he called on closeness to perform his natural claim to this political inheritance, while demonstrating the deeply democratic mode of that self-evident relationship.

At Gettysburg, the associative power of the battlefield is clear, but Lincoln’s “here” marks the unfamiliar terrain that the nation’s “new birth of freedom” must navigate. The relationship Lincoln forges with this place is neither easy nor natural — his syntax tells us that much, for removing his five urgent “heres” from his draft would smooth its flow. Instead, like the missile narrative, Lincoln’s deictic locates a new point of contact between the collective before him and the battlefield’s violence; he lingers on the strangeness of that contact, too. “Here” is where the living lose their narrative authority to the dead and what they “did here”; “here” is where old economies of feeling that once guaranteed intimate national collectivity, change. “It is rather for us, the living, we here be dedicated”: Lincoln’s hurried, syntactically strange amendment emphasises the unusual nature of his call for an active, rather than contemplative, form of being “dedicated”. In calling for action rather than asserting a symbolic vision, Lincoln repositions his listeners instead of recasting them *as* a fully-fledged nation-state; those who will “here be dedicated” are asked to realize the battlefield and bear it away with them. Exploding the cemetery’s incipient symbolic gesture, he buries a nub of experience in his speech, and honors a nation *at its moment of change*. Holding hybridity up to the light, he immortalizes it as the central tenet of his vision for an occupied, embodied form of commemoration.

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Lincoln’s remarks weren’t the final word on Gettysburg’s commemorative legacy: the debates that raged over the Federal government’s mismanagement of military cemeteries in the decade following the war make this quite clear. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that dedication day in November 1863 seemed to have left much unresolved. The jarring epistemological anxieties that had emerged during the conflict hadn’t disappeared. With burials still to complete at Gettysburg, a cluster of military cemeteries gradually emerging across the war’s southern theaters, and the urgent new problem of Reconstruction at hand, it is hardly any wonder that those anxieties rose to the surface of a public discourse still haunted by the task of interment. Images of shallow graves and unknown soldiers lying, uncollected, beyond the public consciousness marked apprehensive reflections on dispersal — of bodies, identities, democratic

³³ “Address in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, February 22, 1861”, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. by Roy P. Blaser et al. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), V, 241-242.

values — that even the most ambitious burial project couldn't account for.

This was a fear of formlessness. Writing for *Harper's Monthly* in 1866, James Russling blamed the lack of a cohesive commemorative symbolism on the disorganised congressional approach to burying the scattered dead. Leaving military cemeteries in the hands of State representatives, he argued, the Federal government neglected its responsibility to the Union dead and the democratic project they'd fought for. Even Gettysburg had been a State-funded venture, yet "Gettysburg was fought *by* the nation, *for* the nation, to *save* the nation. It should be the work *of* the nation to consecrate its precious soil to freedom and the fallen."³⁴ This burial wasn't deep enough, its dedication an ineffectual gesture towards a more perfect commemoration yet to materialize. Lying scattered across southern fields or in cemeteries established by scraps of state legislature, the Union dead had fallen prey to a condition that reflected back, ominously, on the state of the nation. Visiting the Soldiers' National Cemetery in 1865 to find burial work ongoing, John Townsend Trowbridge agreed. Peering into an open grave, he found the unpredictable stuff of the nation's fate at its bottom: "the future," he wrote, "with all our faith, is vague and uncertain. It lies before us like one of those unidentified heroes, hidden from sight, deep-buried, mysterious, its head-stone lettered 'Unknown.' Will it ever rise?"³⁵

As Walt Whitman would suggest ten years after the war's end, the living continued to grapple with the problem of summation. With a characteristic sense of the immense ground any monument must consecrate, Whitman had hoped to imbue that troublesome word "UNKNOWN" with memorial depth in his *Memoranda During the War* (1875-76). This word would be Whitman's monument, one capable of finding out and gathering in "the varieties of the *strayed* dead" scattered across "Virginia, the Peninsula — Malvern Hill and Fair Oaks" and those "hitherto unfound localities" where "in secluded spots, their skeletons, bleach'd bones, tufts of hair, buttons, fragments of clothing, are occasionally found, yet." Its foundations would have seemed solid, too, had Whitman not undermined his written memorial with a parenthetical note:

(In some of the Cemeteries nearly *all* the dead are Unknown [...] at Salisbury, N.C., for instance, the known are only 85, while the Unknown are 12,027 [...] A National Monument has been put up here, by order of Congress to make the spot — but what visible, material monument can ever fittingly commemorate that spot?)

In the violence it wrought and the identities it erased, the war had shaken the tenets of liberal,

³⁴ "National Cemeteries", *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 33 (august 1866), 316.

³⁵ "The Field of Gettysburg", *Atlantic Monthly*, 16 (November 1865), 618.

democratic individualism. As he attempted to re-write a democracy built on the unknown, and unite the nation in the memory of “*our* dead [...] or South or North, ours all,” Whitman recognized the need for a monument imbued with an impossible inscriptive depth, capable of encapsulating the fallen body.³⁶ For Whitman, as for Trowbridge and Russling, the future of postbellum democracy depended on it.

“But what visible, material monument can ever fittingly commemorate that spot?” In one sense, nothing can: the Civil War’s contested history of monument building testifies to that. In another sense, though, there were plenty of material monuments that commemorated the slivers of ground upon which the dead had fallen, or the recesses in which individuals had come face-to-face with obliteration and survived. They just didn’t take the form many had expected. In July 1869, *Harper’s Weekly* reported on the dedication of the Soldiers’ National Monument at Gettysburg: the crowning jewel of Saunders’s design. Its two-page account included a majestic, full-length illustration of the plinth, topped by Liberty’s allegorical form, admired by crowds at her feet (fig. 1).

³⁶ *Memoranda During the War* (Washington, D.C.: Whitman, 1875-76), 56-57.

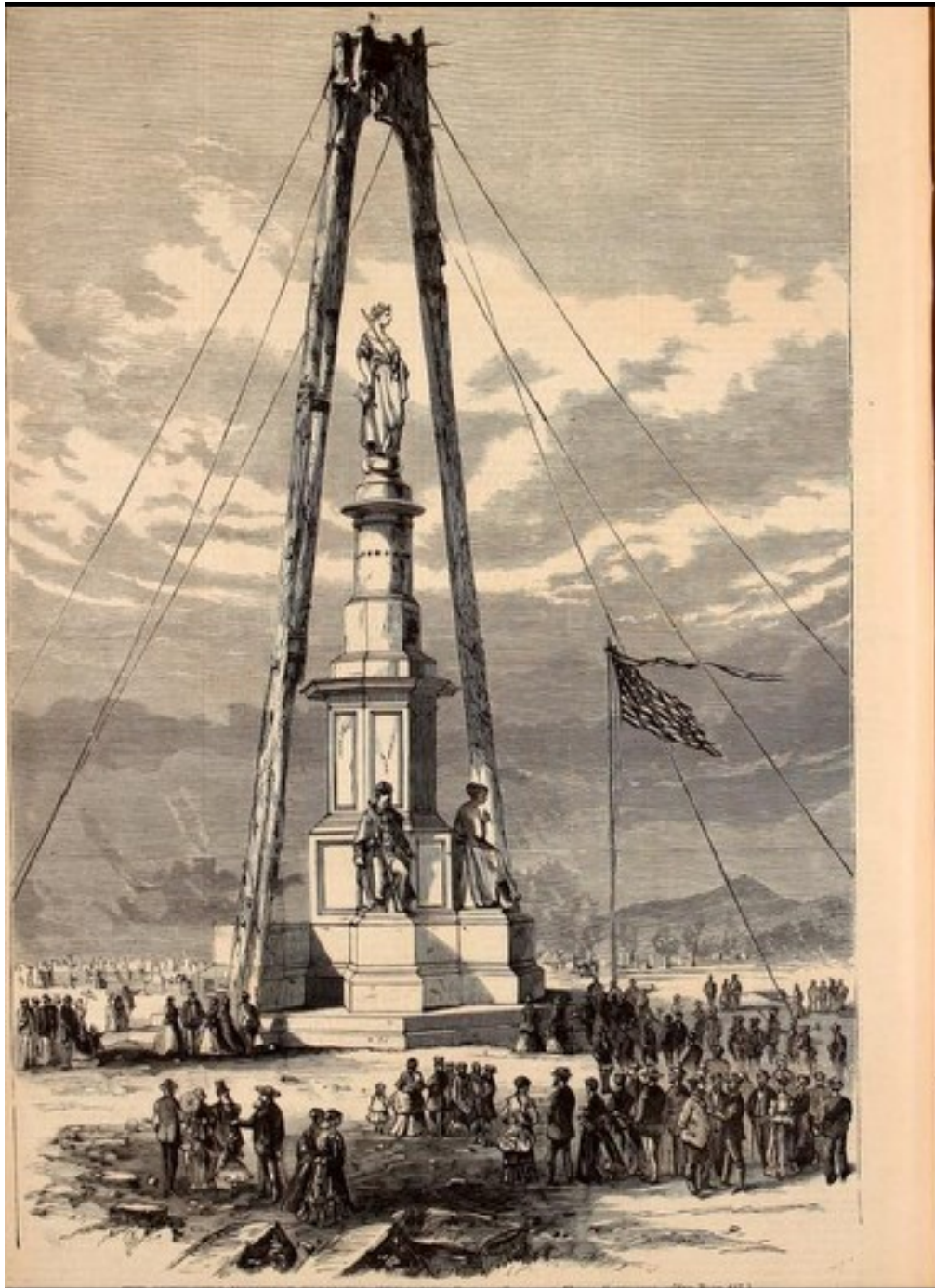


Fig. 1. 'The Gettysburg Monument', *Harper's Weekly*, 17 July 1869, 456.

Not all eyes were on Liberty, though. On the article's verso page, the flip-side of the National Monument's shining coin, *Harper's* included two images of souvenir hunters hard at work, probing trees for shot and shell, and haggling with Gettysburg's relic vendors over the value of their findings (fig. 2). Wrapped around this image of fervent industry, a quotation from Senator O.P. Morton's dedicatory address remembered the men who now slept at the monument's base:

Here lie the father, the husband, the brother, the only son. In far-off homes, among the hills of New England, on the shores of the lakes, and in the valleys and plains of the West, the widow, the orphan, and the aged parent are weeping for these beloved dead.³⁷

Even as Morton's speech gathered the scattered bereaved into the consoling presence of Liberty's monument and her orderly dead, the accompanying image of Gettysburg's souvenir gatherers seems to grasp those dead and bear them away. The *Harper's* article may have hoped to use editorial arrangement to separate official activities from popular pastimes. But it captured, in the process, the peculiar dynamic of Gettysburg's commemorative practice: a mutually-shaping relationship between granite articulations of national value, and the incessant exhumations of the souvenir gatherer. Pecuniary concerns aside, this mnemonic dispersal enabled individuals to disseminate the fallen, and reckon with them on their own terms. We wouldn't be wrong to read their gatherings as a form of disinterment, a refusal to let the dead rest, or forget the moment of their actions.

In a way, Lincoln's vision was borne out with the unabating commemorative effort that went on, and still goes on at Gettysburg. His speech preserved the shock of confrontation with battle, and the sudden reevaluation of self and nation that would drive remembrance forward; souvenirs of violence and the narratives they sparked perpetuated that memorialisation — embodied, anxious, self-conscious as it was. What we can see that Whitman, Trowbridge, and Russling couldn't is that the war's commemoration would never be encapsulated in a single monument. For those who had lived through the war, witnessed gaping graves and learned the projectile's language, the democratic symbolism offered up by the rigidly-ranked rows of the country's National Cemeteries would vie with distinct memories of violence and the disturbed sense of selfhood it brought about. Shells and bullets, kept and considered, became sites around which an ongoing negotiation of self was to take place: self, that is, as it related to violence, to a new and sudden sense of national collectivity, and to the men the war had scattered across the country's battlefields. In contemplating the implications of what they *did* there, Americans would feel for men known and unknown, and the missiles that remembered them.

³⁷ 'The Gettysburg Monument', *Harper's Weekly*, 17 July 1869, 456-458, (pp. 457-458).



Fig. 2. 'Gathering Relics on the Battlefield of Gettysburg' and 'Relic-Sellers, Gettysburg'. 'The Gettysburg Monument', *Harper's Weekly*, 17 July 1869, 457.